



RESEARCH REPORT

A snap-shot of attrition from the osteopathy profession in Australia



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Abstract *Objectives:* Attrition from health professions is of importance to a wide range of stakeholders. Substantial financial and human resources are used to develop and maintain a health workforce. Therefore, attrition from the health professions may represent a waste of these resources for the public, educators, and the practitioner. The aim of this study was to identify factors that influenced the decision to leave practice.

Setting & participants: Osteopathy Australia (formerly Australian Osteopathic Association) members were sent an email explaining the project and a link to an electronic questionnaire. The majority of osteopaths who received the email were practicing and were requested to forward the email to any colleagues or friends they personally knew who were no longer practicing (snowball sampling).

Design & methods: A retrospective quantitative electronic survey was used to gather information regarding demographics, financial aspects and work hours. Likert-type scales were employed to evaluate respondent perceptions across health, lifestyle, financial and other factor, and their potential relationship with the decision to leave practice.

Results: Complete responses were received from 29 osteopaths who were no longer practising. Factors identified by respondents for ceasing practice included family commitments (20%), dissatisfaction with osteopathic practice (20%), and boredom with osteopathic practice (20%).

Conclusion: Multiple factors were identified by respondents indicating that the reasons for leaving the profession are complex, multi-factorial, and often unique to

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the individual. Results from the present study suggest further research is required to identify practitioners who may be more likely to leave the profession, and develop strategies to retain their skills and knowledge.

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Implications for practice

- Common reasons for attrition from the osteopathy profession in Australia include family reasons, lack of financial incentives, and not finding practice sufficiently challenging.
- Some of the reasons for leaving the profession are modifiable and others are not, however they are consistent with other professions.
- Modifiable reasons could be addressed through osteopathy teaching programs, and mentoring in clinical practice.

Introduction

Osteopathy is a rapidly growing profession in Australia with a 19.9% increase in registered osteopaths between March 2012 and September 2015,¹ with $n = 2001$ practitioners as at September 2015.¹¹ Compared to other Australian allied health professionals including physiotherapists² ($n = 27\,765$) and chiropractors³ ($n = 5005$), the total population of registered osteopaths in Australia is relatively small. A decline in the number of practicing osteopaths may have an effect on the overall accessibility of osteopathy services by the Australian public and limit the continued growth of the profession.

Although a workforce snapshot survey was undertaken in 2008,⁴ there has been little research into attrition rates or reasons for ceasing practice in the osteopathic profession. Kleinbaum⁵ undertook a qualitative analysis of factors that contributed to, or caused an osteopath to leave the profession with six participants educated in Australia, New Zealand and the UK. Common themes identified by Kleinbaum⁵ for leaving the profession included financial reasons, injury, family commitments, and boredom with practice.

Physiotherapy and osteopathy are health professions with similarities with regard to practice setting. In discussing why the Australian physiotherapy profession has high levels of attrition, Struber⁶ identified a range of themes including:

underprepared, knowledge gaps, high stress load, lack of coping skills, long working hours and high demands. Research into other allied health professions including chiropractors,⁷ and speech pathologists,⁸ has identified similar findings. The aim of the current study was to begin an exploration of reasons why osteopaths leave the profession to inform future workforce planning and the education of osteopaths.

Methods

This study was approved by the Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee. Consent was implied by completing the questionnaire.

Participants

All members of Osteopathy Australia (formerly Australian Osteopathic Association) were invited to participate. Participants were osteopaths who had permanently ceased practising or working using their osteopathy qualification.

Questionnaire content

Participants were asked to provide a range of demographic information in Part 1 of the questionnaire. Part 2 of the questionnaire evaluated the contribution of a variety of factors, and their influence on participants' decision to leave the profession offered on a five point Likert-type scale (*no significance, minimal significance, somewhat significant, strong significance, it was reason for quitting*).

The factors participants were asked to consider were^{5,9}:

- a) Health & lifestyle factors – Burn out, general health issues, injury from osteopathic practice, family commitments, lack of support at home, age related retirement or moving (intercity/interstate).
- b) Financial factors – Dissatisfaction with income, uncertainty of income, boredom with business side of practicing, insufficient business training.

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